

The Ethical Implications of Starting a Collection

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By definition, historic preservation is devoted to protecting the tangible evidence of people, places, and events from the past in context (figure 1). How, then, do the principles embodied in The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Archeology and Historic Preservation jibe with the idea of removing portions of properties from their contextual settings and placing them in architectural study collections?

Many historic preservationists have an immediate negative reaction to proposals that would purposefully dislocate or fragment significant historic properties. For example, moving an entire historic structure from its original location is discouraged unless there is a compelling need for the move. (Integrity of location is one of the factors considered by National Register staff in evaluating the quality of significance of a property.)

As another example, re-using non-significant parts of historic buildings within the same building may be appropriate in a rehabilitation project, but re-locating distinctive architectural features such as mantels, paneling, and balusters within a building or permanently removing intact parts for re-use at another site have long been discouraged by the National Park Service. The principle of in situ preservation is underscored by The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties whether the treatment is preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, or reconstruction. Thus, a repeated theme of the Standards is the warning against creating "a false sense of history by adding conjectural features or elements from other historic properties."

In a discussion of historic preservation and architectural study collections, this would seem to be the critical juncture: Although the Standards emphasize retention of historic materials and features, they also accept the fact that most materials and features deteriorate and will need to be repaired and replaced. Acknowledging the eventual loss of a property's historic fabric over time provides a basic understanding of the need for architectural study collections as well as the efficacy of initiating collections.

Thus, a property's contributing features may legitimately become parts of collections at some point, although the Standards do not address such collections per se. Within the treatments preservation, rehabilitation, and restoration, distinctive features are always maintained and repaired (figure 2). But if a wooden porch, for example, could not be preserved in its entirety, the remaining historic balusters could be used as models for reproducing new, replacement balusters. The extensively deteriorated balusters could then become part of a study collection within the framework of the Standards.

Also, because the treatment restoration focuses on one significant time in a property's history—eliminating the evidence of other periods—features from other periods that were removed from a building or landscape could also reasonably become part of an architectural study collection; storing removed features together and on the same property is always the preferred approach.

Finally, if a building were slated for partial or total demolition, salvaged features might be available for use in developing a study collection (figure 3).

The architectural study collection can play an important role in providing primary data to future researchers. But it should be remembered that however architectural features are acquired, the opportunity to learn from a property in its entirety naturally diminishes as features are separated and moved from their historic context (figure 4). Thus, acquiring any feature that conveys a property's history carries with it the responsibility to document, to care for, and to share the information it embodies with others. If collections are not initiated and

developed within an ethical framework, they might well be fairly criticized as still another form of pillaging the past.

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